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ABSTRACT

Reflective practice can be beneficial to preservice and inservice teacher professional development. This digest reviews the concept, levels, techniques for, and benefits of reflective practice. Donald Schon introduced the concept in 1987, and since then, many schools, colleges, and departments of education have begun designing teacher education and professional development programs based on this concept. Reflective practice has been defined in terms of action research. Coaching and peer involvement are two aspects of reflective practice seen most often at the preservice level. At the inservice level, critical reflection upon experience and serving as a coach or mentor to peers are effective techniques for professional development. There are many successful techniques for investing teaching practice with reflection. These include action research and portfolio development. The primary benefits of reflective practice for teachers is a deeper understanding of their own teaching style, and ultimately, greater effectiveness as teachers. Other specific benefits include the validation of a teacher's ideals, beneficial challenges to tradition, and respect for diversity in applying theory to classroom practice. (Contains 17 references.) (SM)

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Reflective Practice and Professional Development

Joan M. Ferraro

ED 449 120

Reflective practice can be a beneficial process in teacher professional development, both for preservice and in-service teachers. This digest reviews the concept, levels, techniques for, and benefits of reflective practice.

Refining the Concept

In 1987, Donald Schon introduced the concept of reflective practice as a critical process in refining one's artistry or craft in a specific discipline. Schon recommended reflective practice as a way for beginners in a discipline to recognize consonance between their own individual practices and those of successful practitioners. As defined by Schon, reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the discipline (Schon, 1996).

After the concept of reflective practice was introduced by Schon, many schools, colleges, and departments of education began designing teacher education and professional development programs based on this concept. As the concept grew in popularity, some researchers cautioned that SCDEs that incorporated reflective practice in their teacher education programs were focusing on the process of reflective practice while sacrificing important content in teacher education (Clift et al, 1990). These researchers recommended that reflective teaching combine John Dewey's philosophy on the moral, situational aspects of teaching with Schon's process for a more contextual approach to the concept of reflective practice.

More recently, Boud and Walker (1998) also noted shortcomings in the way SCDEs were applying Schon's concept of reflective practice to teacher education. They took issue with what they considered to be a "checklist" or "reflection on demand" mentality, reflection processes with no link to conceptual frameworks, a failure to encourage students to challenge teaching practices, and a need for personal disclosure that was beyond the capacity of some young teachers. Boud and Walker suggest that these weaknesses can be addressed when the teacher-coaches create an environment of trust and build a context for reflection unique to every learning situation.

Reflective practice has also been defined in terms of action research. Action research, in turn, is defined as a tool of curriculum development consisting of continuous feedback that targets specific problems in a particular school setting (Hopkins & Antes, 1990). As such, it has become a standard concept in teacher education programs. The teacher educator as researcher and role model encourages students to put theories they've learned into practice in their classrooms. The students bring reports of their field experiences to class and analyze their teaching strategies with their mentors and colleagues. This collaborative model of reflective practice enriches students' personal reflections on their work and provides students with suggestions from peers on how to refine their teaching practices (Syrjala, 1996).

Levels of Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is used at both the preservice and in-service levels of teaching. Coaching and peer involvement are two aspects of reflective practice seen most often at the preservice level. In a 1993 study of how student teachers develop the skills necessary for reflective teaching during their field experiences, Ojanen explores the role of the teacher educator as coach. Teacher educators can most effectively coach student teachers in reflective practice by using students' personal histories, dialogue journals, and small and large-group discussions about their experiences to help students reflect upon and improve their practices.

Kettle and Sellars (1996) studied the development of third-year teaching students. They analyzed the students' reflective writings and interviewed them extensively about their reflective practices. They found that the use of peer reflective groups encouraged student teachers to challenge existing theories and their own preconceived views of teaching while modeling for them a collaborative style of professional development that would be useful throughout their teaching careers.

At the level of in-service teaching, studies have shown that critical reflection upon experience continues to be an effective technique for professional development. Licklider's review of adult learning theory (1997) found that self-directedness — including self-learning from experience in natural settings — is an important component of adult learning. Therefore, effective teacher professional development should involve more than occasional large-group sessions; it should include activities such as study teams and peer coaching in which teachers continuously examine their assumptions and practices.

Serving as a coach or mentor to peers is another form of reflective practice for in-service teachers. Uzat (1998) presents coaching as a realistic and systematic approach to ongoing teacher improvement through focused reflection on teaching methods. Uzat also relates the concept of coaching to self-efficacy: Teachers' beliefs that they affect students' lives as well as the school motivate them intrinsically to grow.

Incorporating Reflection Into Practice

There are many successful techniques for investing teaching practice with reflection. Some of these have been mentioned above, including action research. Action research conducted in teacher education programs can be designed to engage the reflective participation of both preservice and in-service teachers. Rearick (1997) describes the benefits of this activity for both groups, as well as for the teacher educator, as used in a professional development project at

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the University of Hartford. In this project, experienced teachers identified knowledge, thinking, and problem-solving techniques and decision-making processes they used in designing instruction for language arts curricula. Based on these discussions, a preservice course agenda for teaching reading and writing was developed. Students taking the course developed portfolios, conducting their own action research in the process. These students also formed a critical learning community, developed modes of inquiry, and shared their diverse ways of valuing, knowing, and experiencing.

A review of current research indicates that portfolio development has become a favorite tool used in preservice teacher education (Antonek, et al, 1997; Hurst et al, 1998). Portfolios encourage beginning teachers to gather in one place significant artifacts representing their professional development. They assemble materials that document their competencies. Portfolios include a reflective component, for when the teacher decides which materials to include, he or she must reflect on which teaching practices worked well and why (Hurst et al, 1998). The portfolios are modified at points throughout a teacher's career, as the teacher continues to apply learning to practice.

Furthermore, new performance-based assessments for teachers developed by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) include the use of portfolios. These are based on the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) model that enables teachers to demonstrate how their teaching relates to student learning (Weiss & Weiss, 1998).

Participation in some professional development institutes can also be a way to incorporate reflection into practice. Professional development programs need not always focus on specific teaching methods and strategies; they can also focus on teacher attitudes that affect practice. Wilhelm et al (1996) describe the curriculum of a professional development institute that offers teacher interns an opportunity to explore attitudes, develop management skills, and reflect on the ethical implications of practice in classrooms with cultural compositions vastly different from their previous experiences. By its nature, this kind of professional development institute causes teachers to step back and critically reflect not only on *how* they teach, but also on *why* they teach in a particular way.

Benefits of Reflection in Practice

The primary benefit of reflective practice for teachers is a deeper understanding of their own teaching style and ultimately, greater effectiveness as a teacher. Other specific benefits noted in current literature include the validation of a teacher's ideals, beneficial challenges to tradition, the recognition of teaching as artistry, and respect for diversity in applying theory to classroom practice. Freidus (1997) describes a case study of one teacher/graduate student struggling to make sense of her beliefs and practices about what constitutes good teaching. Her initial pedagogy for teaching was based on the traditions and practices of direct teaching. Her traditional socialization into teaching made it difficult for her to understand that her views of good teaching were being challenged in her practice. But the opportunity for exploration through reflective portfolio work enabled her to acknowledge and validate what she was learning.

Conclusion

Research on effective teaching over the past two decades has shown that effective practice is linked to inquiry, reflection, and continuous professional growth (Harris 1998). Reflective practice can be a beneficial form of professional development at both the preservice and in-service levels of eaching. By gaining a better understanding of their own individual teaching styles through reflective practice, teachers can improve their effectiveness in the classroom.

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